

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

1331 PENNSYLVANIA AVE., N.W., SUITE 520N
WASHINGTON, DC 20004-1710

August 26, 2022

SECRETARY OF LABOR,	:	
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH	:	
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA)	:	
	:	Docket No. CENT 2022-0012
v.	:	A.C. No. 23-02077-540128
	:	
WASHINGTON COUNTY	:	
AGGREGATES, INC.	:	

BEFORE: Traynor, Chair; Althen and Rajkovich, Commissioners

ORDER

BY THE COMMISSION:

This matter arises under the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, 30 U.S.C. § 801 et seq. (2018) (“Mine Act”). On October 12, 2021, the Commission received from Washington County Aggregates, Inc. (“Washington County”) a motion seeking to reopen a penalty assessment that had become a final order of the Commission pursuant to section 105(a) of the Mine Act, 30 U.S.C. § 815(a).

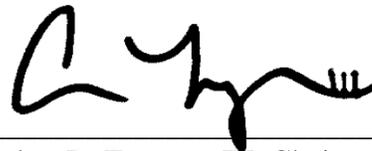
Under section 105(a) of the Mine Act, an operator who wishes to contest a proposed penalty must notify the Secretary of Labor no later than 30 days after receiving the proposed penalty assessment. If the operator fails to notify the Secretary, the proposed penalty assessment is deemed a final order of the Commission. 30 U.S.C. § 815(a).

We have held, however, that in appropriate circumstances, we possess jurisdiction to reopen uncontested assessments that have become final Commission orders under section 105(a). *Jim Walter Res., Inc.*, 15 FMSHRC 782, 786-89 (May 1993) (“*JWR*”). In evaluating requests to reopen final orders, the Commission has found guidance in Rule 60(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, under which the Commission may relieve a party from a final order of the Commission on the basis of mistake, inadvertence, excusable neglect, or other reason justifying relief. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 2700.1(b) (“the Commission and its Judges shall be guided so far as practicable by the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure”); *JWR*, 15 FMSHRC at 787. We have also observed that default is a harsh remedy and that, if the defaulting party can make a showing of good cause for a failure to timely respond, the case may be reopened and appropriate

proceedings on the merits permitted. *See Coal Prep. Servs., Inc.*, 17 FMSHRC 1529, 1530 (Sept. 1995).

Records of the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) indicate that the proposed assessment was delivered on August 16, 2021 and became a final order of the Commission on September 15, 2021. Washington County asserts that it mistakenly believed that its written request for a safety and health conference with the MSHA district office started the process of contesting citations, and that it would be notified in writing if its request was granted or not. Furthermore, shortly after the penalty assessments were delivered the mine owner, and subsequently certain administrative staff, came down with Covid, preventing Washington County from timely filing a contest of the proposed penalties. The Secretary does not oppose the request to reopen, but urges the operator to take steps to ensure that future penalty contests are timely filed.

Having reviewed Washington County’s request and the Secretary’s response, we find that the operator acted with excusable neglect in failing to timely file a contest of the proposed penalties. In the interest of justice, we hereby reopen this matter and remand it to the Chief Administrative Law Judge for further proceedings pursuant to the Mine Act and the Commission’s Procedural Rules, 29 C.F.R. Part 2700. Accordingly, consistent with Rule 28, the Secretary shall file a petition for assessment of penalty within 45 days of the date of this order. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 2700.28.



Arthur R. Traynor, III, Chair


William I. Althen, Commissioner

Marco M. Rajkovich, Jr., Commissioner

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